

For Mr. Shepard Stone.

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THE JAPANESE AT ASPEN --- Some Reflections

Ivan Hall, 3 September 1970

The performance, or rather the non-performance, of the two Japanese participants in the technology conference has provided an epitome of the general difficulty we face in involving the Japanese meaningfully in international conferences of this nature. I am very glad that I attended this seminar, because it has been an eye opener, and a number of ideas as to probable cause and possible remedy have presented themselves to me in the course of living with this problem during the last four days.

The difficulties the Japanese had were of a linguistic --- and social --- nature, not one of substantive capabilities. Both Hayashi and Tanaka were excellent choices in the two fields represented, respectively, by Panels I and IV, Hayashi being one of the leading scholars who has addressed himself to problems of technology and value change, and Tanaka being one of the bright young bureaucrats charged with the task of charting the future development of the Japanese economy.

If we limit ourselves to the very few highly Westernized Japanese with really good English and genuine social poise, we shall be cutting ourselves off from ninety-five percent of the Japanese cultural, political and business elite. We shall be getting the same people, good as they may be (like Michio Nagai, or Shigeharu Matsumoto) over and over again --- to the exclusion not only of luminaries like Tange the architect or Kawabata the (Nobel prize-winning) novelist, but also of a whole host of younger artists, writers, political scientists, economists, party leaders, and what have you, all of whom ought to be involved in a fruitful East-West dialogue.

I think it is worth the extra effort. But it will take some effort.

This conference has shocked me into a fresh awareness of the depth --- of the extreme depth --- of the linguistic, cultural and psychological gap which separates Japan from the rest of the world: a world in which the Western nations, their former colonial appendages, and even the Soviet bloc share an immense conviviality based on a decent command of the English language, and a grasp of the western mode of personal relationships. Witness the magnificent performance of the members from Indonesia, Ghana and Yugoslavia. And the Russians or the Indians would have performed just as brilliantly, had they been here.

I say 'shocked', because living in Japan I am keenly aware of the immense energy, ability and ambition of the Japanese Nation, and of their immense potential for good --- or for something less than good --- in international society during the coming decades. If all this energy is not hooked up into some sort of healthy rapport and reciprocity with the rest of the world, it doubtless will find its way into an economically self-centered, culturally arrogant, politically unpredictable sort of new nationalism.

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There are many signs of this already, and I am beginning to think that perhaps the chief mission of IACP in Japan from now on may not be that of Cultural Freedom so much as that of International Association.

Prof. Hayashi had perfectly fascinating things to say about the student movement in Japan, the generation gap there, the potentially fruitful role of the irrational in modern technological society --- all divulged to me privately over dinners at the various restaurants in Aspen. But this is what he should have been telling his fellow participants during the panels and coffee breaks --- and what they should have been drawing him out on.

What went wrong? Why? What can we do about it next time?

I: WHAT WENT WRONG

(a) Sum-zero impact. I wonder if the Staff realize how bad it all really was? Hardly anybody read Hayashi's paper; it was not discussed in any meaningful way in Panel I; neither Hayashi nor Tanaka made meaningful contributions to either the panel or plenary sessions; and as far as I can tell neither the panel reports nor the final Statement bear any imprint of a Japanese presence at this conference. They might, in effect, just as well not have been here. Especially since there was no impact outside the conference, in informal socializing, either. If Hayashi and Tanaka did tend to keep to themselves, I saw very few of the other participants make any effort to get to know them.

(b) Wasted effort: Good IACP money down the drain; an imposition on the time of two very busy Japanese gentlemen; and all my wheedling and cajoling and wining and dining of Hayashi and Tanaka in Tokyo gone for nothing --- as far as the conference was concerned, at least.

(c) "Cultural Options" ignored. As the only example of a highly industrialized, sophisticated modern society raised on a non-Western cultural base, Japan should have been "Exhibit A" under this major theme of the conference. Most of the talk about "cultural options" was concerned with greater cultural variety in Western society, and lip-service was paid to non-western development patterns in the developing countries. But Ghana and Indonesia (for instance) still have to effect their marriage between modern technology and traditional culture. Japan already has done it. I wonder how many people at Aspen realized that Prof. Hayashi --- his very awkwardness, indeed --- was the product of a "cultural option", of Japan's decision to modernize on her own cultural terms, including her own linguistic terms?

The cultural instance of Japan has all sorts of suggestive angles. Consider for instance the fact that the Japanese, for all their modern technology, manage to get along without the psychiatrist. They have very very few of them, and hardly anyone goes to them. Merely two or three such examples, I think, greatly would have enriched the conference, would have emphasized the wide spectrum of cultural options actually available to the human race.

II: WHERE THE TROUBLE LIES

(a) Japanized Modernization. What I just said about Japan having chosen to modernize on her own terms, is the real heart of the problem. It is a great mistake to think that the Japanese don't mix well simply because their English is inadequate; there are important differences in psychology, and in etiquette, as well.

The Japanese have incorporated the whole of Western literature, both technical and humanistic, into their own tongue. They can, according to specialty, discourse eloquently on Greek drama, or Keynesian economics or cybernetics --- in the Japanese language, which has been modernized to the point where the entire Aspen conference could have been conducted in it. That cannot be said of Malay or Hindi or Swahili, and it is only fair -- if comparisons must be made --- to point out that the eloquent and articulate participants from several developing nations at this conference are culturally products of the West, not of their own native cultures. The modern, technological culture of these former colonial lands is still that of the West, and it floats, in an emulsive fashion so to speak, on a traditional culture to which it has no organic link. Japan by contrast is a solution of traditional and modern, of Western and old Japanese cultures, and the end-product is something which is shared equally by cab-driver and cabinet minister.

The price paid, of course, is a certain distance from the rest of the world. But I wonder if we Westerners adequately appreciate how much of the world is still in cultural and linguistic terms a satrapy of Europe; and that when and if the Third World really turns inward upon its own cultural resources, or "options", international conferences are going to be deluged by Asian and African participants as inadequate in English, and as different from us in manner and psychology as the Japanese are today? Learning to accommodate the Japanese a little better would, if nothing else, help us to prepare for that day.

What the Japanese have saved for themselves, and the rich Japanized-modernized culture which they today enjoy, is exemplified by the bookstores of Japan --- crammed with texts on the most erudite and sophisticated topics, all in the native tongue, and jammed counter-to-counter with people of all ages reading and buying. The reading-est nation on earth!

(b) Genuine language barrier. Bear in mind the real isolation of the Japanese language on the global linguistic map. No relation to the Indo-European family, or (except for characters) to the Chinese, which at least has the same general word order as English and French. The word- (and therefore thought-) order of Japanese is often almost the exact reverse of the English. We have such trouble learning Japanese not because it is perversely difficult, but because it is so distant from English. The Japanese have to cover the same distance in reverse direction, and English is certainly not an easy language for them to learn.

(c) The etiquette of group discussion. The Japanese, even at home, tend to be far better listeners than we. Even where no moderator is present, they will generally wait patiently until the speaker has had his say, before jumping in. In conferences outside Japan, where their natural modesty is compounded by linguistic insecurity, they will practically never jump into a conversation or grab the floor for themselves. The more confident are likely to raise their hands for recognition, as Tanaka often did (and was often ignored), or will sit in silence (if less confident) throughout the discussion and unburden themselves only in private conversation outside the conference room. Hayashi found it so difficult to get into the verbal free-for-alls of Panel I, and of the plenaries, that he had to ask for time in advance, and have it set aside for him.

About half way through the conference, Hayashi told me, "In Japan, we do not like to argue just for argument's sake." He was referring specifically to his experience on Panel I, but I think that is the impression that both he and Tanaka generally must have taken home from the conference. People, he told me, seemed to be talking mainly to make points against each other, rather than "trying to work together toward the truth", as Hayashi expressed it.

The problem, therefore, is not just one of Japanese shyness, but of our own arrogance as well --- or if not always arrogance, of our lack of patience and our eagerness to butt in with our own line of argument. When I think of the infinite patience and politeness with which the Japanese will listen to a foreign speaker in Japan, and the deliberate (if sometimes artificial) questions they will ask to get a foreigner involved in a group discussion, I can only express my own sense of shame --- as a Westerner --- at so much of the pettiness and egotism in evidence at this conference.

A couple of examples:

- 1: During the coffee break during the first morning of panel meetings, I suggested to Paul Goodman that it might be interesting to try to draw Prof. Hayashi into the discussion, in which he had not yet said so much as a word. Goodman had made some very important references to Taoism, and here was an Oriental sitting right in their midst. Goodman's answer to my suggestion was, "Well, I'm not so sure that would be a good idea; the Japanese have a lot of trouble with their English, and they're so terribly polite." And then he just walked off.
- 2: In Panel IV (as reported to me) someone asked, in reference to something Carl Kaysen had said, "Well, what about Japan?" Kaysen --- although Tanaka was sitting at his very elbow --- replied, "I don't know about Japan," and went right on talking.

3: When Hayashi finally got the floor in Panel I, he started to introduce his concept of "exogenous" and "endogenous" technological innovation, when E.C. Mesthene interrupted him rather brusquely to ask Hayashi for a definition of terms. It was the Harvard professor bringing a sophomore to heel for overly pretentious language. But most educated people know the dictionary meanings of these two terms, and Hayashi was getting around to explaining, in terms of his general concept, what he meant by them anyway. Their meaning would have been fairly clear if Hayashi had been permitted to talk on for a minute or two. Donald MacRae, the moderator, then tried to help Hayashi out a bit, after which Hayashi retired back into his shell.

(d) Japanese academicisms. This ties in with the point just made. The Japanese unfortunately have a strong penchant for abstract concepts and terminologies, a lot of it imported from the West and not always thoroughly digested. Their love of abstraction and of academicisms generally creates still another barrier with the outside world. Rather than cut them off, these foibles should be patiently borne with, and the Japanese encouraged to state their ideas in simpler, everyday language. Hayashi's paper, and his few verbal interventions, were in effect an effort to get into English what would have been appropriate at a Tokyo meeting of Japanese specialists in his own subject. The Japanese should be made to realize that at international conferences they are spokesmen not only for their own professions but for Japan itself and for Japanese culture in general. They should be encouraged to speak in simple and general terms, as laymen, about their own culture, to Western participants who also are laymen in everything except their own academic specialties.

IVI: WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

The Japanese, in Japan, take the language barrier for granted and make due preparations to overcome it: expensive simultaneous or other interpreting facilities; English-speaking guides or chaperones to help foreign conferees around town during their stay; and a very deliberate effort to make foreign visitors at home and happy during their sojourn.

By contrast, in my experience, foreign participants at conferences held in this country are pretty much allowed to sink or swim. No special, extra, effort is made on their behalf.

What the Japanese do when they host a conference involves an enormous extra expense, and effort, to break down the barriers. Granted, they have no other choice. But it seems to me that the decent thing is for us to reciprocate with a little extra conscious effort on our part to accommodate them, a little more planning, a little more patience, a little more caring.

Japanese at Aspen

(a) Language Aids: Something can be done along this line, but not very much. Simultaneous translation simply is not in the cards for most conferences, although an interpreter would be worth the extra cost in the case of very important figures (say a cabinet minister, or Kawabata the novelist, or even Tange if he would not be insulted by it) whose English is very bad.

Speaking now only of the very top rank of Japanese, (where the prestige of IACP would greatly benefit from the extra cost), I should think the State Department might be willing to provide an interpreter free of cost in the case of public officials. For the others, it might work very well to team them with some top American scholar in their own field. For example, Kawabata might be "teamed" with Prof. Seidensticker of Michigan University, who has translated his works into English, and accompanied Kawabata to Stockholm for his Nobel award.

I agree (with Mr. Stone) that you would not want consecutive translation. That takes too much time. Rather, the "interpreter" could sum things up for the Japanese participant at appropriate points in the discussion, get his reaction (on the sidelines, without interrupting the discussion itself), and then give the gist of that to the conference. As I look back on it now, I probably could have sat at Hayashi's elbow during Panel I, grabbed the floor for him when he wanted it (and then let him intervene by himself once the breach had been made), or made interventions myself on the basis of notes he could have scribbled to me. I could have spoken for him in the plenary session after going over his statement with him, say, at the luncheon break --- but he seemed anxious to speak for himself.

I cite these examples to suggest how much still can be done short of formal, time-consuming, translation.

Most Japanese you would be getting for your conferences, however, would ~~not~~ like Tanaka and Hayashi --- understand most of what was going on, and would be able to reply and intervene meaningfully if given more of a chance. This means that the area most susceptible to improvement is (b):

(b) Adjusting to their etiquette. Fellow panel members (of a panel including a Japanese) should be briefed in advance about the habits and psychology of the Japanese participants and urged to draw them out. And to exercise a little extra patience when the Japanese do intervene. If the panel members fall down in this regard the moderator must see to it himself that the Japanese get in on the discussion..

The moderator might check with the Japanese during coffee or other breaks to make sure things are going all right. If there is something the Japanese have wanted very much to say, but have not been able to say, the moderator himself might take the initiative in introducing the subject, and then letting the Japanese talk, in the ensuing session. Hayashi, for instance, was promised five minutes during the afternoon session of Panel I, but never got it --- after waiting all afternoon for it. He told me that he was told that there were "too many other important things that had to be discussed." This little bit of cultural arrogance epitomizes the seeming assumption of most participants that what the Japanese wanted to say, or could have contributed, was of no great consequence.

Somebody, presumably from the staff, should make a special effort to get Japanese participants introduced around socially during the pre-conference dinner and cocktail party. It might be a good idea, also, to assign somebody to keep an eye on the Japanese throughout the conference, and make sure that things are going reasonably well for them. If I had not been here, Hayashi (at least) probably would not have been heard at all and might well have gone home greatly embittered.

In order to ensure, finally, some Japanese imprint on the final published record of any conference, they might be given the chance to submit their reflections on the conference, in writing, or to present in the form of an addendum some of the things they were not able to say at the time of the conference itself. For instance, at the suggestion of Mrs. Michaelis, I plan to go over Hayashi's plenary-session statement with him in Tokyo, clean it up, and get some of the other points he wanted to make down in writing, and pass them all on to Mr. Goldsmith for his book.

IV: WHAT PROF. HAYASHI WANTED TO SAY

When I suggested to Messrs. Stone, Slater, King and Cell-man at the very close of the conference that the seminar had been "too Eurocentric", and that 1.5 billion Japanese, Chinese and Indians had not been represented, I put the matter in too exclusively political terms. It was not the nations, but rather the cultures of the East that were in far greater need of attention as I see it. Western rationalism came under heavy fire throughout the seminar, and hippie culture was given its due, but no consideration, no voice was given to the great historical non-western traditions of the human race, most of which have managed to incorporate a far greater element of the irrational in their final cultural mix, than has been the case in the West. In China, bureaucratic Confucianism was balanced by Taoism, while Japan has had --- and still has --- her Shintoism and her Zen.

Here, I think, was the main point which Hayashi was trying to make: namely, that it may be possible to effect a far more daring accommodation of the rational and the irrational within the same culture, than ever has been attempted by Western Man.

"It's all mono-value", Hayashi said of Panel I during the first luncheon break --- meaning that all the participants, including Goodman, were still talking from the basic standpoint of Western rationalism. When Nesthene as rapporteur announced to the Tuesday plenary session that Panel I had approved the idea of a multi-value society, Prof. Hayashi was amused. "What they are talking about," he said, "is a plurality of rational values, of rational preferences, not about the coexistence of the rational and the irrational."

What Hayashi has in mind goes far beyond mere American pluralism, or philosophical eclecticism, or even the Romantic Insight --- which barely scratched the surface of the irrational. "Perhaps," Hayashi surmised, "one would have to have been to Japan, and have had some contact with Zen, to appreciate what I have in mind. Murray Cell-mann has been to Japan. Perhaps he has an inkling."

(Alas! --- what this conference really needed was a Wajsetsu Suzuki, ---a Rabindranath Tagore. . . or an E.M. Forster).

Hayashi's study group in Tokyo is working on the possibility of "greater elasticity of social function." That is, I gather, on the socially creative role of "non-purposive" activity in modern technological society. This would include both "non-purposive" individuals (e.g. the hippie element) or groups, as well as non-purposive elements within the value-system of any given individual.

I asked Hayashi if the following two examples would be in line with the general thrust of what he wanted to say to the conference; and he said yes:

1. The scholar-bureaucrat of Classical China, who was a rationalistic pragmatic bureaucrat at the office, but a mystical, poetic Taoist (I state this all very, very crudely, of course) in his off-hours. Taoism was never a free standing, self-contained society or culture; it always existed symbiotically alongside Confucianism.
2. The possibility some day of a type of "Hippie Technologist", or "Hippie Planner" in our own culture, with the "hippie instinct", as Goodman called it, creatively informing the feeling and thinking of the technocrats of Hasan Ozbekhan's paper, rather than smoldering along as the exclusive philosophy of a resentful and isolated sub-culture.

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